

The Boston Globe

DRACUT

Pilot's dream, his memory preserved

By Christine McConville, Globe Staff, 11/20/2003

John Ogonowski had a saying that went like this: When you plant a building on a field, it's the last crop that will grow there.

On Monday, two years, two months, and six days after his tragic death at the hands of terrorists on Sept. 11, 2001, that saying became part of his legacy.

A 33-acre plot of land that he once farmed was saved from development, and promised a fertile future. People at Monday's ceremony marking the preservation of the land called the act a "living memorial" to Ogonowski.

"One hundred, 200, 300 years from now, this land will still be producing crops," Ogonowski's brother Jim said at the dedication.

With \$690,000 in federal funds and \$80,000 of its own money, the Dracut Land Trust, a group Ogonowski helped found, bought the Broadway Road land. Relatives of Ogonowski's had sold the land to a developer, who planned to use it as part a 335-acre project with 234 homes and a golf course. The land trust bought the parcel from the developer after agreeing with the state that the land would be used only for agricultural purposes.

Ogonowski was born into a long line of Dracut farmers. After becoming a commercial airline pilot, he spent his spare time farming, and later, working to preserve the few remaining farms in his hometown. He died on Sept. 11, 2001, when terrorists hijacked the jet he was piloting and flew it into New York City's World Trade Center.

This past Monday, in a field that is part of his parents' farm, across the street from the land that is being preserved, local farmers in their work boots gathered with uniformed pilots and politicians in suits. They joined Ogonowski's parents, Alexander and Theresa. There were old friends, and people who had never met Ogonowski, mostly people who lost loved ones on Sept. 11, and had forged new bonds with other widows and widowers.

"It's beautiful, just beautiful," said Alexander Ogonowski about the future of the hayfields across the street. "John would be thrilled."

The land that is being set aside was once owned by John Ogonowski's cousin, Thaddeus Ogonowski Sr. John helped farm the land when his cousin owned it and some of the heirs of Thaddeus Sr. sold the land to the developer. It is next to Broken Wheel Farm, a working farm run by John's cousin, Ann Okun, and her husband, Peter.

Ted Ogonowski, Thaddeus's son and one of the people who sold the land to the developer, said he is happy to see it continue as farmland.

"My grandfather bought it. My father grew crops on it, and I was raised on it," he said. "I agree with the outcome." He said the initial development plans had earmarked the 33-acre parcel as open space and golf course fairways, but as the plans were refined the proposal changed. At one point as many as 40 homes were to be built on the parcel, he said.

Doug Willett, a Dracut selectman for 29 years, was practically in tears at Monday's dedication. Like Ogonowski, Willett was raised on a farm and has

seen his community transformed from a farm town to a suburb. He called the dedication the highlight of his nearly three decades on the board. "It's a joy," Willett said.

It was just about 100 years ago that the Ogonowskis settled in Dracut. The first few generations lived as farmers. John grew up working in the fields, but later trained as a pilot. When he wasn't working as a pilot, he could be found in mud-splattered work boots and a flannel shirt, riding his tractor. His own farm is on Marsh Hill, a part of Dracut characterized by small farms, sweeping vistas, and wildlife. The piece of land that is being preserved is on the other side of the hill.

In 1998, developer Fred Fahey announced plans to build an 18-hole golf course and homes on property that straddles Marsh Hill. Fahey planned to buy most of the land from one landowner, but accumulated parcels from others, including the 33 acres that is being set aside.

Fahey, who declined comment, needed special permits to build the proposed 6,682-yard golf course, 20,000-square-foot clubhouse, and the luxury homes, and the town began a series of bitter and divisive public meetings on the proposal. Ogonowski was usually there. He didn't speak up often, but when he did, his knowledge and conviction made the crowd pay attention.

At the Monday dedication, George Malonis, a friend of Ogonowski and land trust member, recalled one tense meeting. Ogonowski had questioned an aspect of the proposal, and the developer's engineer questioned him. "He asked John who he was, and John told him, 'I'm a steward of the land.' It was said in a way that made the

engineer fear for his personal safety," Malonis said.

The neighbors fought hard to save Marsh Hill, and its towering oak trees, historic stone walls, and low-lying blueberry bushes. "When we think of them coming in and knocking everything over with bulldozers, it makes you sick," John Ogonowski told the Globe back in 1999.

Ultimately, the town issued Fahey the permits he needed. Then there was a lawsuit and, in the end, the number of homes was scaled back to 179. Fahey sold off some of the land he had bought for the project.

Along the way, the opposition formed the Dracut Land Trust to preserve the farmland that remained. Ogonowski and his neighbors became more vocal, too.

Once, Ogonowski even left the cockpit before a flight began to talk about the importance of farm preservation with a passenger, then-Governor A. Paul Cellucci, who was flying to the Republican National Convention.

But on Sept. 11, Ogonowski was killed.

"The world turned upside down, and the heart and soul of the land preservation movement was gone," U.S. Rep. Martin T. Meehan, a Lowell Democrat, told the crowd Monday.

"[Land trust] donations came in from all over the country," Malonis said. That money, along with funding from the US Department of Agriculture's [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#), helped pay for the 33 acres.

At least some of the land will be made available to immigrant farmers who participate in the New Entry Sustainable Farm Project. The program in a partnership of Tufts University, the University of Massachusetts Extension Service, the Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture, and the US Department of Agriculture, helps newly arrived farmers continue tilling the land in New England. Ogonowski backed the program, and let farmers to use his land. "What a tribute," said Teresa Mathai of Arlington, after the dedication. She was there to support John's widow, Peggy Ogonowski. Mathai also lost her husband on Sept. 11, 2001.

"I love that term, living memorial. There's something about it," she said.



Memorial grows in Dracut for slain pilot

Land grant saves field of Ogonowski's dreams

"Nothing lasts forever but the Earth and sky." from "Dust in the Wind," by Kansas

By DENNIS SHAUGHNESSEY
Sun Staff

Tuesday, November 18, 2003 - DRACUT American Airlines pilot John Ogonowski may have perished in the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorists attacks, but he left behind a living memorial in the land he worked and loved.

The Dracut farmer's efforts to preserve a 33-acre tract of farmland on Broadway Road land that was slated to be part of the Meadowcreek golf course and housing development became a reality yesterday during a dedication ceremony near the Ogonowski family farm where John grew up.

"I heard John say many times that when a building is planted in a field, that's the last thing that will ever grow there," said his brother, James Ogonowski. "These fields now lie dormant for the long New England winter, but they will continue to provide food and shelter for the wildlife until next spring when they once again return to life."

Federal and state officials, as well as some 50 residents and local officials, braved a cold November morning to attend the dedication. After the ceremony, Ogonowski's widow, Peggy, who attended with the couple's three daughters, Laura, Caroline and Mary Katherine, said it was good to finally have something happy to observe.

"We've been to so many memorials in the last two years," she said. "This is one of the first times there's been any real joy. John would be so

pleased and proud of what has been done."

With the help of the Dracut Land Trust, which he helped organize, and a \$690,000 federal grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the land was secured and can only be used for agricultural purposes.

U.S. Rep. Marty Meehan, a Lowell Democrat, spoke of Ogonowski's passion for farming and his work in training immigrant farmers from Cambodia as part of the New Entry Sustainable Farm Project.

"John worked side-by-side with these new Americans, plowing and harrowing the soil," said Meehan, who along with U.S. Sen. Edward Kennedy helped secure the funding through the 2002 Farm Security Act. "The life work of this humble humanitarian will forever remain larger than the tragedy of his untimely death."

Also in attendance yesterday were two of Ogonowski's fellow pilots. Capt. Doug Wood and Capt. William Bronson of American Airlines flew with Ogonowski for many years.

"Even when he was seven miles in the air, he was still a man of the earth," Bronson said. "He was always looking down at Mother Earth, weather permitting, and I always knew he did so with a greater appreciation for what was down there than most of us did."

"He was more than just a pilot," Bronson said. "He was a leader and

a friend. He was one of the most substantial individuals you would ever want to meet. He was the same John Ogonowski day in and day out."

Attorney George Malonis, a member of the land trust, worked closely with Ogonowski to protect the land from the developers' shovels. Malonis said that after Sept. 11, the land trust received donations from all over the country.

"Some contained donations of hundreds of dollars from large corporations. Others were five and 10-dollar donations from individuals who were impacted by John's story," Malonis said. "He always identified himself as a steward of the land. This is a great tribute to his image and his legacy."

In 2004, the Ogonowski family will observe the 100th anniversary of their ancestors' immigration from Poland.

"Like every family, we've had our highs and lows," said James Ogonowski. "But I cannot think of one moment that has been greater than seeing our friends, our family, our community and our elected officials coming together to save this land in John's name. It is a living memorial."



Dracut dedication to draw a crowd

By ROBERT MILLS
Sun Staff

Saturday, November 15, 2003 - DRACUT A slew of state and federal officials will be on hand Monday when a 33-acre tract of farmland is dedicated in the memory of farmer and pilot John Ogonowski, who died in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Ogonowski and the Dracut Land Trust fought to save the land from development as part of the Meadowcreek golf course and housing development up until his death.

The Land Trust continued that fight afterward, and earlier this month finally purchased the land with help from a \$690,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The 33-acre tract, consisting mostly of hay fields, is located across the street from Ogonowski's White Gate Farm, and also has frontage on Broadway Road, adjacent to the Broken Wheel Farm.

Terms of the federal grant and an agricultural preservation restriction will ensure the town is never used for a non-agricultural purpose.

Part of the land will be used by the New Entry Sustainable Farm Project, which trains immigrant farmers to grow crops in the soil of their new nation.

Ogonowski was a supporter of the program before his death, and hosted part of it on his own farmland.

The dedication is scheduled for 10 a.m. Monday at Broadway Road and Jones Avenue, near the Broken Wheel Farm and the Ogonowski family farm, where John grew up.

Rep. Marty Meehan; Lt. Gov. Kerry Healy; R. Mack Gray, deputy undersecretary for natural resources and the environment for the USDA; Jim Little, administrator of the USDA's Farm Service Agency; and Commissioner Doug Gillespie of the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources are expected to attend.



Farmland legacy preserved for 9/11 pilot

by Tom Farmer

Tuesday, November 18, 2003

While the history books will always note that John Ogonowski was the pilot of American Airlines Flight 11 on Sept. 11, 2001, the Dracut aviator and farmer's legacy was forever preserved yesterday with the protection of 33 acres of his beloved farmland.

A collaborative effort between federal, state and local conservationists, the land across from Ogonowski's White Gate Farm on Route 113 was purchased for nearly \$800,000 under the federal Farm Bill so farmers for generations to come will be able to till the land without fear of development.

"Finally, some joy," said Ogonowski's wife, Peggy, on the dedication of the property her husband worked so hard to save from development into housing and a golf course. "Everyone who drives by can feel the respite you enjoy when you see open space."

Ogonowski's hijacked plane was the first to crash into the World Trade Center on 9/11, but in Dracut he is better known as a person who worked tirelessly for agricultural causes.

"His love for the land kept him grounded to his family at home," said U.S. Rep. Martin Meehan (D-Lowell) who, with Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, was instrumental in getting the Farm Bill passed.

A self-described "steward of the land," Ogonowski, an Air Force Vietnam veteran, helped Cambodian immigrants learn to farm and prosper in Massachusetts.

"Even when he was seven miles in the air, he was a man of the Earth," said William Bronson, the chief pilot in Boston for American Airlines.



WCVB-TV Channel 5, Boston (ABC affiliate)

Living Memorial To Honor 9/11 Pilot

Pilot's Farmland To Be Preserved

POSTED: 10:18 a.m. EST November 17, 2003

UPDATED: 5:44 p.m. EST November 17, 2003

DRACUT, Mass. -- A living memorial has been dedicated to the pilot of American Airlines Flight 11 -- one of the two hijacked planes to slam into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

NewsCenter 5's Jorge Quiroga reported that in addition to being a pilot, John Ogonowski was a farmer in the town of Dracut.

It is there that 34 acres of farmland once owned by his family will be preserved from future development.

Under grey, threatening skies, family, friends and neighbors of John Ogonowski celebrated a dream fulfilled.

"It's a beautiful piece of land. Soon, people will be able to come by Route 113, look at this side of the road, see John's parent's farm and see that side of the road and see some open space," John's wife, Peggy Ogonowski, said.

The farmland was preserved forever in John Ogonowski's name. It was purchased with a \$690,000 grant from U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"And it's not just saved for today and for our generation, it is saved as open space for all generations. Years from now, that land will still remain open and free," John's brother, James Ogonowski, said.

Five years ago, the old farm was bought and slated for development. It was then that John Ogonowski immediately took up the battle to preserve it as open space.

The pilot of the first plane to hit the World Trade Center, John Ogonowski was both an aviator and a farmer.

One hundred years ago, his family first tilled the soil.

"Even when he was seven miles in the air, he was still a man of the earth. He was always looking down, weather conditions permitting, and he was looking at the land," America Airlines Capt. William Bronson said.

"Around my house, which I live about a half mile from here, it's all homes, and the farmland is disappearing. If we don't save it, we won't have nothing left," farmer Ed Leczynski said.

"It lays dormant, but in the big circle of life, there is still food and shelter there for wildlife, and next spring when the earth warms again, it is going to return to life," James Ogonowski said.



Ogonowski Memorial

Two years and two months after the plane he was piloting crashed into the World Trade Center, land that John Ogonowski is now a permanent memorial to his life's work. (Julia Bovey reports, 11/17/03 4:59 p.m.)

 [Watch video](#)

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